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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

10 June 1959

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Character and Prospects of the Somoza Regime
 in Nicaragua

1. The Somoza regime has controlled Nicaragua for twenty-five years through its firm control of the armed forces and the established political processes. Opposition to the regime has hitherto been weak, divided, and manageable. Now the regime is threatened by a variety of revolutionary movements among Nicaraguan exiles and by a greatly emboldened internal opposition. The danger to the regime is primarily psychological: it is less a function of the actual capabilities of any particular opposition group than of a rapidly spreading conviction that the Somozas' time has run out. Whatever the outcome of any particular revolutionary attempt, it has become unlikely that President Luis Somoza will be able to remain in office to the expiration of his term in 1963. If moderate opposition elements prove incapable of bringing about an early change in government, anti-US and pro-Communist elements will probably gain increasing influence in the revolutionary movement and in the eventual successor regime.

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The Character of the Somoza Regime

2. From 1933 until his assassination in 1956, Anastasio (Tacho) Somoza was in firm control of Nicaragua through his personal control of the National Guard, the country's only armed force. He maintained a facade of democratic constitutional government, occupying the presidency only occasionally himself and maintaining an elected Congress (including a hand-picked minority opposition), but he completely controlled all elections and appointments. During this period the Somoza family amassed an impressive private fortune in landed estates and business enterprises, as did other closely associated families. Opposition to the regime consisted mostly of members of the former ruling elite (landholding and business interests). They resented their deprivation of political power and concomittant economic opportunity. These disgruntled elements were allowed considerable freedom of expression so long as they presented no serious threat to the regime. On occasion, however, the National Guard was brutal in its suppression of revolutionary conspiracies. On the other hand, the regime was acceptable to the generality of the urban population, to whom it represented stability and a measure of economic improvement. The rural population was generally apathetic.

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3. As President of Congress, Luis Somoza was his father's constitutional successor in the Presidency. His position has been confirmed by election in 1957 for a six-year term. His younger brother, Anastasio (Tachito) Somoza, remains in command of the National Guard.

4. Luis Somoza has recognized the rising sentiment against dictatorship in Latin America and has endeavored to free himself of that stigma by exercising less stringent police controls than did his father. At the same time, he did not take office in order to preside over the liquidation of the Somoza political machine and family fortune. Personal pride and a sense of responsibility oblige him to maintain the situation which he inherited as best he can in changing circumstances. In any case, it is impossible for Luis Somoza to divest himself of the family name and reputation.

Revolutionary Elements

5. The Castro revolution in Cuba has greatly stimulated revolutionary activity throughout the Caribbean area. The Somoza regime is high on every list of the dictatorships which must soon

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be swept away. The constant reiteration of this theme has established the idea that, however its end may be brought about, the days of the regime are numbered. This idea creates a bandwagon psychology which is in itself a powerful stimulus to revolutionary activity.

6. In this atmosphere, an attempt was made to unify the many Nicaraguan opposition groups in a National Opposition Union (UNO). This loose coalition includes the major faction of the traditional Conservative Party, the Independent Liberal Party (which is the anti-Somoza element of the traditional Liberal Party), and smaller anti-Somoza groups, both in and out of Nicaragua. The recognized leader of this opposition grouping is Enrique Lacayo Farfan. It has the active support of ex-President Figueres of Costa Rica and the implicit support of President Betancourt of Venezuela, the two outstanding liberal, anti-Communist leaders in the Caribbean area.

7. A separate Nicaraguan revolutionary movement has developed among exiles who flocked to Cuba in response to Fidel Castro's call for the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. Castro apparently commissioned "Che" Guevara to facilitate the organization and preparation of these exiles for revolutionary action;

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Guevara's partiality for Communists has established Communist leadership of the group. This group is probably smaller in numbers than that led by Lacayo Farfan, but its prospects were greatly enhanced by the active support of the Cuban Government. Castro has recently become more discreet regarding open support for revolutionary exiles, but is probably continuing to provide covert support for this group.

8. Figueres sought Castro's cooperation in an attempt to overthrow the Somoza regime, but found that Cuban participation would involve Communist participation, which he was unwilling to accept. The result was a resounding quarrel between the two leaders. Lacayo Farfan has also solicited Cuban support, but could not obtain it on acceptable terms.

9. The present revolutionary invasion of Nicaragua was made from Costa Rica by followers of Lacayo Farfan. Among other considerations, it was apparently designed to forestall a revolutionary attempt from Cuba. It was made in conjunction with an attempted general strike fomented by the Nicaraguan business community without the cooperation of the small Nicaraguan labor movement, which is Communist dominated. The strike was effective only as a lock-out and has collapsed. The

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revolutionary invasion has failed to produce immediate results for lack of popular response. The invaders are still at large, however, and, if they can maintain themselves as guerrillas, may in time be able to sap the prestige and general acceptance of the regime. Recognizing this, President Somoza is seeking to end the conflict by negotiation.

The Prospects

10. The Somoza regime can probably survive the immediate crisis. However, its ability to withstand the slow erosion of its prestige and acceptance which would result from a prolonged guerrilla resistance is doubtful. The willingness of the business community to hazard the attempted general strike is symptomatic of a conviction that the end of the regime is near. The leniency of the terms on which the regime settled with the business community and is seeking to settle with the invaders is a probable sign of weakness.

11. The regime cannot expect much help from the OAS, where it has few friends and where the conspiracies against it are recognized as genuinely Nicaraguan (as distinguished from the essentially foreign character of the recent invasion of Panama). In the OAS, a substantial majority would probably prefer some

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solution which would ease the embarrassing Somozas out with minimal disturbance of the peace.

12. If the moderate opposition is not able soon to produce a convincing prospect for an early change of government in Nicaragua, its more ardent and impatient followers may turn to Cuba for leadership in hope of more effective results. The sentiment would be that only by the united action of all revolutionary elements could the regime be overthrown. The moderate leadership itself might be moved by this consideration. The end result would be an increase of anti-US and pro-Communist influence in the revolutionary movement and in the eventual successor regime.

13. In these circumstances, the Somoza regime may become increasingly disposed to negotiate a political settlement with its moderate opponents, from whom it might expect more favorable terms than from the Castro-supported revolutionary movement. Luis Somoza has already promised to yield place in 1963 to a duly elected president not of the Somoza family. He has so far resisted pressure to shorten his term of office, but might eventually yield on this point. Other negotiating problems would involve getting rid of Tachito Somoza, provision for disinterested

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supervision of a free election, and arrangements regarding the extensive Somoza family properties.

14. Considering the psychological situation primarily, we believe it unlikely that Luis Somoza will continue in office to the end of his terms in 1963.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

SHERMAN KENT
Assistant Director
National Estimates